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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 LAGOS 000082

SIPDIS

NOFORN

STATE PASS DOE FOR DAS JBRODMAN AND CGAY  
TREASURY FOR ASEVERENS AND SRENENDER  
COMMERCE FOR KBURRESS  
STATE PASS USAID FOR GWEYNAND AND SLAWAETZ  
STATE FOR DS/IP/AF, AF/EX, DS/IP/OPO, DS/ICI/PII, DS/DSS/ITA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/20/2015

TAGS: [EPET](#) [PGOV](#) [ASEC](#) [PTER](#) [KHLs](#) [PINR](#) [ETRD](#) [CASC](#) [NI](#)

SUBJECT: BREAKING NEWS APPEARS POSITIVE, BUT DOUBTS REMAIN

REF: A. LAGOS 81 AND PREVIOUS

[1](#)B. ABUJA 76

Classified By: Pol/Econ Chief for Reasons 1.4 (D & E)

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SUMMARY  
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[1](#)1. (C) The committee set up to negotiate the release of the Tidex hostages (reftels) met today and announced progress in identifying the kidnappers, and again promised a positive outcome to the crisis in short order. The Bayelsa Governor, as chairman of the group, provided photographs of the hostages that indicates they are not in as bad health as previously reported. The Governor also claimed that he is the only person with whom the group will talk, and that it is splintering over disagreement about the hostages. While we have no solid reason to doubt this rosy picture, questions about the veracity of the information remain. With these positive developments originating from one source of information, we will work to verify them independently. END SUMMARY.

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Presidential Committee Kicks Off  
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[1](#)2. (C) Bayelsa Governor Goodluck Jonathan chaired the first meeting of the government's committee on the hostage crisis, and presented himself as engaged and optimistic. While Governor Jonathan is nominally in charge, Econoff, who attended the meeting, said de facto leadership appears to be in the hands of an unidentified senior-level State Security Service (SSS) official. Minister of State for Petroleum Resources Daukuro; Dr. Igali, Bayelsa State Secretary of the Government (SSG); Emmanuel Uduaghan, Delta State SSG; the Rivers State Commissioner of Information; Bayelsa Commissioner of Police; and others are also members. The committee plans to re-convene at 1100 on 23 January. Econoff will have another meeting with the Governor before that time.

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GON Identifies Possible Mastermind  
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[1](#)3. (C) Governor Jonathan indicated the kidnappers told him Abel Ebifemowei, ex-Governor Alamieyeseigha's cousin and Bayelsa State transportation official, had masterminded the kidnapping, gathering youths from Ondo, Rivers, Bayelsa, and Delta states and funding their activities. Ebifemowei is also under suspicion for assisting Alamieyeseigha's escape from UK authorities in December 2005. The SSG said the GON plans to issue a warrant for his arrest on allegations of organizing and financing militia activity in four states.

[1](#)4. (C) According to the Bayelsa SSG, Ebifemowei fled on January 18 to his Atlanta residence. The SSG said Professor Okoko, leader of the Ijaw National Congress, got up from a January 22 meeting to answer "an important call from the U.S.," which most people interpreted as a call from Ebifemowei.

[1](#)5. (SBU) Nigerian press reports indicate O.O. Ogah and Company filed a complaint against Ebifemowei with the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) on July 13, 2005, for allegations of money laundering. A Scotland Yard representative assigned to the hostage case confirms Ebifemowei is implicated in the crimes for which former Gov. Alamieyeseigha is being tried in the U.K. Press reports allege Ebifemowei launders money through three firms: Mowei Communications, Edubamo Ventures, and Ebilayefa Resources Ltd. Bayelsa State contacts describe Mowei Communications as a shell company. The Mowei Communication office and home address Ebifemowei provided on his DS-156 visa application are identical. (COMMENT: While Ebifemowei is not highly reputable, Mission is concerned that he may be a convenient political scapegoat for the kidnappings. END COMMENT)

16. (S/NF) Ebifemowei was issued a non-immigrant visa at ConGen Lagos on April 28, 2005. Lagos consular section gave the original DS-156 application form to the FBI.

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Presidential Committee Kicks Off, Lack of Cohesion Evident  
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17. (C) In the meeting, Governor Jonathan claimed the kidnappers would negotiate with no one but him. Later, Minister Daukoru requested our advice on security issues and negotiation tactics, as well as technical assistance in locating the hostages and initiating wire taps. Despite Minister Daukoru's forthcoming request for assistance (a request ostensibly endorsed by President Obasanjo, who dispatched Minister Daukoru to Yenagoa to assist in resolving the crisis), the meeting demonstrated deep divisions within the GON regarding accepting U.S. and U.K. assistance in resolving the kidnapping. With the SSS representative and the Delta State SSG leading opposition to cooperation and information sharing, the meeting yielded little progress. After asking Econoff and the HMG representative to step out of the meeting, the committee did not agree to designate a contact for USG/SSS liaison. They declined to provide contact information for the former chief of the Iduwini people and Government Ekpompolo, with whom they are in discussions.

18. (C) GON representatives were optimistic about the release of the hostages, with Governor Goodluck predicting the situation would be resolved within 24 hours, and SSG Igali predicting resolution by 23 January. GON representatives claimed the hostages are in the Nkerokoko area, based on witness reports of non-local food deliveries to the area.

19. (C) Bayelsa Attorney General Dixon finally told us he met with the kidnappers on 19 January, at their request. He agreed the hostages were in the Nkerokoko area, and the kidnappers told him they were in good health. He told them no negotiations could take place before the hostages were released. AG Dixon told us he recognized one the kidnappers as a known illegal bunkerer; he did not see any FNDIC members known to him.

110. (C) Bayelsa SSG said the kidnappers are splintered, with the larger faction believing they have gone too far and should release the hostages and the smaller wanting to continue to hold them. He also spoke with the uncle of Government Ekpompolo, who said that while his nephew is not directly involved, many of "his boys" are and that Government could stop them but would not unless the GON gave assurances regarding the safety of his men.

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COMMENT  
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111. (C) In the last 24 hours, we have seen a substantial increase in communication about the hostages through official channels and increasingly optimistic assessments of their condition. This appears to be good news. However, the information is coming from a single source: the Governor of Bayelsa State directly or through his SSG. Yesterday, we characterized the governor as weak and out of the loop, but today he tells us he is the only one with whom the kidnappers will negotiate. And at least one element of the presidential committee also appears to have ruled out FNDIC involvement without providing any justification for doing so. The governor's assessment that divisions within the kidnappers will lead to the hostages imminent release sounds positive, but so have many other statements over the past ten days. Most of these positive developments depend on one source of information, and we have yet to independently confirm them.  
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